

MY STORY

THE

HOLOCAUST

BY

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It took me fifty years to be able to write and express my feelings about the Nazi atrocities that took place in Hitler's era. I am telling my story because of the widespread ignorance and anti-semitic deniers, obsessed with prejudice and open hatred. This is my legacy of the Holocaust. It is not easy to live with those memories. There are times that I do suppress my feelings.

My family consisted of my parents, four sisters and a baby brother. We lived a religiously observant life in a middle class neighborhood of Lodz. Lodz is the second largest city in Poland, population of 300,000. One day in September, 1939, my friends and I were out of doors when we heard airplanes go by. We looked up with a feeling of excitement, for we seldom saw planes in our vicinity. We wished that someday we would also fly somewhere, some place. Needless to say, I found out soon enough that my wish was a fantasy and that Hitler had invaded Poland.

That evening while we were together for dinner the atmosphere was unnatural. Something was not right...too much hush-hush. I noticed that my parents and my older sisters were whispering and talking about preparations in case of war. I overheard my sisters talking about escaping. That frightened me. Two or three days later the Nazis took over Lodz.

I had heard of wars, but I could not have imagined that such a catastrophe could take place. This was the beginning of a nightmare. At that time we were still able to walk around the city and I was curious to see the soldiers. I saw men in uniforms with swastikas, something I had never seen before. I had mixed emotions about the soldiers. They were singing the songs my mother sang. They were friendly; they even offered me a sandwich, but I

refused because it was not kosher. Yet, I had a premonition that something was wrong.

I told my mother that I would pick up my brother at Heder (Hebrew School). On the street the soldiers seemed to me to be very happy. Suddenly a fear came over me. Instead of going for my brother, I was forced into an army bus with other Jewish people who were much older than I. I did not panic because I was with them. We were taken for a long ride, but I didn't mind. Thinking back now, I see how naive I was. When we finally came to a stop at a big parking lot, we saw many cars, trucks, automobiles and motorcycles. We were made to wash them spic and span, inside and out.

I told the soldiers that I was tired and hungry. It was getting dark and I wanted to go home. Although they spoke Polish, they did not want to hear my plea. Finally at dusk they let us go. We had to walk back to our homes. My family was very worried about me. I was exhausted and hungry. At home I could not eat, I just plopped down on my bed.

The following weeks we were allowed to leave our homes for a few hours to stand in line to buy food, but we had a curfew. One day my father came home with his beard cut off. He was distraught. The Nazis stopped him wanting to know where he kept his valuable possessions. They were looking for gold and jewelry. The windows had to be covered with black paper and there was no electricity.

Some time later, we were forced to leave our home to go to a different area which became the Lodz Ghetto. Before the ghetto was closed, my older sisters escaped, as they had planned. We finally heard from them. To our indescribable joy, they were safe in Bialistock, Russia. They sent us large

packages of food, so much that my mother shared it with others. After some time, we no longer heard from my sisters. We all worried.

One day we heard from a cousin who came back from Russia and told us that one of my sisters was killed by a bomb while trying to save someone's life. We never learned the whereabouts or what happened to the second sister. My third sister ran away with her fiance to another city. We later learned that the city was bombed and everyone perished.

Once again we were uprooted and moved to another area in the Lodz Ghetto. We "schlepped" our belongings on foot to our new destination. After we were settled in a one-room apartment, we had to find a job in order to survive. There was a lot of confusion. I could not understand how a cultured people like Germans could be so barbaric. We had to face the horror and terrible reality of the new situation. We were under great stress, not knowing what the next day would bring.

There was a large factory in the ghetto. My mother worked in the kitchen and my younger sister did crocheting there. I worked at the other end of the ghetto braiding and sewing straw, and making overshoes for the SS troops to keep their feet warm. I had blisters on my fingers ~~and~~ my father was too sick with tuberculosis to work, and my brother was too young.

Sometimes my mother managed to bring home coffee grounds and potato peels, and sometimes there was a potato hidden among the peels. My mother made a "cake" out of these ingredients. We promised ourselves that if and when the war would be over, we would eat the same food in order not to forget, just as we commemorate the Hagadah at a Passover Seder. We did it for a while until our stomachs could not tolerate it any more.

At work we received some watery soup and a slice of bread. We were lucky if we found a piece of potato in the soup. We were hungry most of the time. People kept losing weight and getting sick. My father developed an ulcer. Since my mother worked in a kitchen, we could have her ration of bread. One of our cousins worked in a non-Jewish butcher shop. He risked his life and stole some horsemeat for us. My parents could not make themselves eat it, for it was not kosher. A doctor friend told them that if they wouldn't eat it, they would not survive much longer. My father did die from starvation in 1942. His body laid in the same room with us for over a week, until he was taken for burial. We had to wait our turn to bury my father. There were too many deaths. My father laid on the floor, covered with a white sheet, with a candle at his head. There was no electricity. We children were frightened. I kept my feelings inside. When the body was removed I burst out crying, to the point where my mother had to control me. I don't know if it was out of relief that the body was gone, or that I had lost my father at a tender age, or both. I still have nightmares from time to time about this episode.

We lived day by day with terror, not knowing what to expect next. In 1944 we heard rumors that an evacuation was going to take place, destination unknown, presumably to work in a better place.

My family was among the last to leave the Lodz Ghetto, but my cousins remained to clean up the city. Again we were told to pack everything and go by foot to the end of the city (ghetto). Again we "shlepped" as much as we could. The chaos and our apprehensions were indescribable. Our cousins came to the gates to see us, but the gates were already closed. We talked through the bars. This was the last time we saw each other. ...I had an intuition that

they knew this was the beginning of the end. While saying our tearful farewells, we told each other to be strong. Then we were ordered into the overcrowded cattle cars. There was no room to move. One girl who had her period for the very first time did not have any sanitary napkins. Her mother took off her panties and gave them to her as a substitute. The cattle cars kept moving back and forth. It seemed like an eternity. Eventually we came to a stop. We had arrived in Auschwitz. Facing us was a large sign, "Arbeit macht frei."

Upon our arrival in Auschwitz, we were in a state of shock and total confusion. One woman could not walk fast enough and she was taken to a line where an SS man shot her with a rifle. I cannot erase that scene from my mind. This was my first but not last encounter with Nazi brutality. Then I saw a woman who was beaten 25 times with a police baton and buckets of water poured over her. We had to look on helplessly.

We panicked when we saw women and men in SS uniforms with rifles and guns ordering us to separate into lines, men to one side, women and children to the other. Those who were sent to the left went to the gas chamber; those to the right to work.

My mother must have realized what was happening and she took off her watch. She gave it to me saying, "Use it for bread or in exchange for whatever is necessary." My little brother was in front of us and was ordered to go to the left; my mother automatically followed him even though she could have gone to the right. She was only 42 years old and still able to go to work, but she did not want my brother to go by himself. My sister and I wanted to follow our mother, but an SS man grabbed us by the shoulder, pointed with a long stick to the right and said, "Erst muszt du arbeiten, dann wirst

du krapiren" (First you must work, then be slaughtered.) I became hysterical. I was very attached to my mother. Someone, perhaps a kapo (an inmate of the camp assigned by the Nazis to carry out orders issued by the Nazis, but there were others who were self-appointed in order to gain favor with the Nazis), warned us, "This is Auschwitz. Here are the crematoria and gas chambers." I did not want to hear this; I did not want to believe it.

A SS woman ordered us to the showers. Our heads were shaved and we were given striped uniforms, striped underpants and wooden shoes. My sister and I did not recognize each other. We were deprived of our names and given numbers instead. I asked, "What's happening?" We all looked bewildered. We felt like criminals. By coincidence, I met an acquaintance with whom I had worked in the ghetto straw factory. I began to cry and ask questions. "What is happening to us? Why?" She gave me a lecture and warned me to listen and obey the SS guard or be killed. She had been in Auschwitz for some time and knew what she was talking about. I asked myself, "What is the use of going on?" And yet something inside me told me not to give up, that when this tragic horror would end we would be reunited with the family. I remembered that our mother had told us to be strong. That is what kept me going, hope against hope.

We were counted, given a slice of bread and some watery soup. That night we spent out of doors. We had no covers. All we had was the striped uniform dress. Even though it was August, the ground was damp. We were very cold; we tried to get warm by cuddling. We could not sleep.

The next morning we were lined up and counted again. We were always counted. They wanted to make sure that nobody escaped. There were electric wires all around us. Whoever touched the wire was electrocuted. While

standing in line in the hot August sun, a kapo passed by with a bucket of water. I asked her and pleaded for some water because I was very thirsty. Her reply was, "Do you know where you are? This is Auschwitz. Be quiet if you know what's good for you." "But I am thirsty" I repeated, hoping that she would understand because she, too, was an inmate before she became a kapo. Then I was clobbered over my head, because I told her that she did not remember when she was "in my shoes." Suddenly a friend from the Lodz Ghetto appeared. Lola saw and heard what had transpired and warned me not to say or ask any questions—that I could be killed. She and her two sisters had been in Auschwitz for some time already, and she "knew the ropes." She was so young and knew so much about life and death. She went back to her sisters. From then on we lost track of each other and I did not see her again until we met, by coincidence, after the war. We did not recognize each other.

We were waiting in line, again not knowing for what we were waiting. We were hungry, thirsty and tired. Finally, we got some watery soup and a slice of bread.

I don't remember how long we were in Auschwitz (I lost track of time) before we were again transported in cramped cattle cars. I don't know how long the train traveled before we came to a stop and again we were in a camp surrounded by barbed wire. This camp was in the outskirts of Hamburg, Germany. We were in despair and shock and felt isolated from the world. We were divided into groups—eight to ten per barrack. There were no windows and only one door. We opened the door for daylight and fresh air.

We were given one army blanket per person, one metal bowl for soup, a cup and a spoon, as well as a striped dress, underpants and wooden shoes. We slept on bunk beds without mattresses. We had to be up at 5:00 A.M. for

"appel" (roll call). Every morning we had to walk a few miles to work. Our job was to mix cement, make bricks, and clean bombed out houses. We had blisters on our hands and backs ached. We moved the cement and bricks in wheel barrows. The camp food consisted of a brown watery liquid which was supposed to be coffee, a slice of bread (25 grams per person), watery soup with a few bits of vegetables and chickpeas. If we were lucky, occasionally we would find a piece of potato. We had to learn to cope with anxiety and confusion of being trapped in the most destructive period of human history.

In the wintertime we froze. In order to provide some warmth we used the heavy paper sacks, that the cement came in, over our camp uniforms. I remember one morning on the way to work on a snowy day I stopped for a minute and took off my wooden shoes (Dutch shoes) in order to take off the snow that was stuck to them, for I could hardly walk. I was beaten with a rifle for stopping. That night I did not feel well. In the morning I felt feverish and sick. One of our roommates advised me not to go to work. She told our kapo who told the SS guard that I was sick. To my surprise, they let me stay in the dispensary a few days. They were always afraid that we might be contagious and they would catch something from us and an epidemic might break out. This was in my favor. The doctor was Jewish so I was really glad to be sick and not have to go to work. For the first time in my life, I felt good being sick.

My only surviving sister Helen worked in the camp kitchen. Sometimes she managed to steal some potatoes. She risked her life and I was afraid of the consequences, nonetheless, we were happy to have it. With us was a woman with her three daughters. I envied them because they were together. She was like a mother figure to us. Fortunately, they all survived the Holocaust.

In 1943 in Hamburg there were other prisoners of war, non-Jews from Italy, working with us. We did not have a common language so we communicated with our hands and body language, hoping that we would not be caught by the SS. The Italians tried to help us in every way with our work; I guess they felt sorry for us. I asked one of them if he could bring me a toothbrush, since they had more freedom to move around. He did bring me and my sister toothbrushes but no toothpaste. They didn't have toothpaste either. Instead, they brought us some salt to use. They also brought us some shower caps, although we had no hair. We were very grateful to them. The time passed a little easier and quicker because we worked together. It also broke the monotony. My sister even got a sandwich which she shared with me.

To many of us the best time was when we heard the air raid sirens and the planes, so we could go in hiding in the bomb shelters. At that point I did not mind if a bomb would come down. The only reason we went to the shelters was to avoid having the planes (their enemies and our allies) see us.

Some people looked in the trash cans on the way to the cement work and picked out whatever could be eaten because we were always hungry.

One day as we walked to work (outside of the camp) we were surprised to see two well dressed men wearing hats (which I had not seen since the war broke out in 1939) walking alongside us. It seemed strange. At that moment I did not know what to think, but when they tipped their hats in greeting and in a whisper they said, "Shma Yisroel," ("Hear O Israel"), I got goose bumps all over my body and had tears in my eyes, and yet I was afraid to cry because of fear that the SS men might notice. We did not know what to think. The men motioned to a bombed out house. At first I hesitated, but my Helen was more aggressive. On second thought, I figured what did we have to lose, our lives

weren't worth much then. The men didn't say anything else. Helen and I went to that bombed out house and found a package with sandwiches and apples. Our joy was indescribable. Even today while I am writing this, I feel moved by it. I don't know to this day if these men were Jews or non-Jews. We did not see or hear from them again.

We were in Hamburg for eight months; it felt like years. It was now 1944. Some of us were planning to escape; some were daydreaming that when and if the horror would end we would be free. We heard a rumor about the harsh reality that we would be transported to a death camp named Bergen-Belsen, and dit really happened.

In Bergen-Belsen we had mixed feelings—is it better to suffer or to die? But this was not our choice. Again we stood in line. Again we spent the night outdoors. Again in the morning we stood in line for roll call. This time we stood for a very long time, longer than usual, without being counted. A woman said, "Nu, kinderlech zol uns dachten az mir zeimen hindred your alt, in mir muzen schtarben." ("Well children, let's pretend that we are a hundred years old and it is time to die.")

We did not go to work that day—we had no food, no water. Helen told me that I fainted and that a woman slapped me and I came to. All of us were weak and tired. We could hardly walk or talk. Eventually we were told to go to the barracks. We all laid down on the bare floor, but we didn't mind it, as long as we could close our eyes. We saw people lying on the floor in the barrack and we thought that they were asleep, but we soon discovered that they were dead. We had to climb over them in order to pass by to find a place to lie down or sit down. I don't remember how or where each of us got a whole loaf of bread. At that point I was too exhausted to eat and I fell asleep.

It was unusual not to be working. It seemed very strange to us. We did not know what was going on. To our astonishment a woman gave birth to a baby in the barrack. We had not noticed that she was pregnant. A SS woman gave the baby a bottle of water and to the woman a piece of bread. The baby did not survive. We did not see the woman again.

It was April 1945. The atmosphere in the camp changed to a different kind of chaos and confusion. We saw the SS men and women running. They were without their uniform jackets. Our people also ran not knowing where. Helen and I ran toward the gate and were stopped by either Italian or Hungarian troops. We also heard shooting. We saw some of our people being shot. Later we heard over the loudspeaker, in English with a British accent, "The war is over! You are free! No more fear! No more Nazis!" There are no right words to express my feelings. People were overwhelmed.

We were taken to a place named Belsen, on the outskirts of Bergen-Belsen. I was not feeling well; I was delirious; I had typhus. The British soldiers took me to their army hospital. After I recuperated the next thing Helen and I did was to look and hope to find someone from our family or friends. I found two friends, one was by coincidence as I was on my way to the UNRRA warehouse to pick up some clothes. The reunion was emotional.

Lola was the one who warned me in Auschwitz not to speak up to the Kapos or the guards or I would be severely punished. I found the other friend Sarah in a Belsen hospital where I was looking for family and friends. She was also ill with typhus. She lost her entire family. Helen and I did not give up searching and we decided to go on a journey with another friend and continue our search. We traveled by many means of transportation. We hitchhiked, we took trains, and trucks. We went from one refugee camp to another. Our

determination and desire to find someone was so strong that we did not think of the consequences, even though the drivers who gave us rides were Germans. Thinking back now, I realize that we were naive to take chances. We found two cousins, brothers, who survived in Russia. We also found a place to settle down in Fulda, Germany, near Frankfort. It appeared to me that the people in Fulda were nice to us out of fear, guilt or sympathy. A few Jews were there already. I went back to Belsen to tell rest of the survivors that we had found a place in Fulda to settle temporarily, until we had an opportunity to emigrate to a country of our choice.

We organized a Jewish community center that attracted survivors from all over. We also organized a social group that served as a support group for our moral, emotional and physical needs. People from all over Europe came to Fulda to join us. We made our first Passover Seder in our little Jewish community in Fulda. We told the story not only of the exodus from Egypt but also our exodus from the Holocaust. Many of us had mixed emotions for surviving. Guilty and painful feelings for we no longer had any relatives with us. We did not have Haggadas to read from so we recited our own Haggada from the ghettos—Auschwitz—Bergen-Belsen—Treblinka—and many, many other places. Besides the traditional Passover seder menu, we put on a special plate the kind of food we ate in the concentration camps. There were potato peels, a cake made from coffee grounds, chicory, and a variety of leaves. We sang partisan, Haganah and Palmach songs with tears rolling down our cheeks. We welcomed Elijah the prophet at three o'clock in the morning.

Some people remained in Fulda and started businesses with the help of the Joint Distribution Committee. Eventually most of the Jewish people left to settle in Israel, the United States, Canada and other countries. I got

married and remained in Fulda until we came to the United States. Helen went to the United States.

I do not write my story to elicit sympathy. I tell it because the world should know about the Holocaust. We must remember and never forget. There are people who refuse to believe the Holocaust took place. No individual survivor is capable of revealing the whole history of what occurred during the Nazi regime. The crimes of the Holocaust were so horrifying that they are beyond description.

I tell my story on behalf of those who perished by the Nazis and for those who can no longer speak. My wounds are engraved in my mind and in my heart and cannot be erased. I lived a life without living.

Free at Last

Free at last, is it true?
I am free, could that be?
I hear voices, you are free.
No more war...
Am I hallucinating, or is it a wish come true?
Am I free from Nazism? Or am I in a daze or confused? Is it true?
I look around me, I see people running, they are free, could that be?
I see birds, I look up to the sky.
I could cry, I feel high. Is it a vision or am I free?
Am I free from horror and disaster?
I make choices, I am free, could that be?
I touch, I feel, I smell flowers, I am free.
I am FREE!!!!!!!!!!
I feel good, I feel sorrow, but I am free.
Free at last.
It is true!!!

Walter Knause